



Special Studies and Evaluation

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State Intervention For Academic Turnaround¹

Background

"Get tough," results-oriented school accountability systems now exist in 32 states and in 34 big urban districts. Based on high standards and student test scores, these accountability systems seek enhanced school and district performance and improved student achievement, while incorporating rewards and consequences for results.

These systems are highlighting habitually low-performing schools, especially bottom dwellers that consistently and noticeably shortchange their students educationally. Such schools raise the spectre of state intervention on the basis of academic failure because the states are ultimately responsible for acting on behalf of students. Yet, state academic intervention and school takeover are largely uncharted territory with no body of research for guidance, only a minimal record of attempts, and even fewer examples of turnaround success.

As a result, states face three major implementation issues regarding academic intervention:

- adequate enabling legislation and policies
- specification of operational details
- identification of key elements of school turnaround

Adequate Enabling Legislation and Policies

State intervention in low-performing schools needs a firm basis in clear and precise legislative statutes and accompanying policies. From the 22 existing state "academic bankruptcy" laws permitting state intervention, consensus is emerging about the content of such laws.

Important characteristics include an advanced accountability system, based on standards that clearly delineate grade level content and performance standards in each subject, along with appropriate assessments and incentives. Also needed are measures for school performance per the standards, rewards and sanctions for performance, and triggers for sanctions (i.e. the performance levels that designate a school as "low-performing" and eligible for intervention).

A solid state intervention system further embodies the following six cross-cutting characteristics: fairness to ensure credibility and success of the system; focus on the goal of supporting and enhancing student learning; coherence by aligning standards and assessment; understandability of the system by the educators affected and the public being served; capacity building for teachers and administrators through professional development and needed resources; and, legal defensibility achieved by appropriate use of student tests and assessment.

Operational Details

For a state intervention system to be effective it needs clearly specified procedures that make sense to those affected. In most states with academic intervention systems, school or district failure to meet specified improvement goals within a specified timeframe usually triggers state sanctions or interventions. The model for state response generally incorporates three phases of increasing variation and severity, ranging from warnings to temporary leadership replacement to school takeover to, potentially, reconstitution (i.e. replacing a school's entire staff as a remedy for failure).

¹This summary is based on a paper, "Can State Intervention Spur Academic Turnaround?" published by WestEd, the regional education laboratory for Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah, as a result of a Fall 1997 meeting jointly sponsored by the State Education Improvement Partnership at the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Nevada Department of Education, and WestEd.